

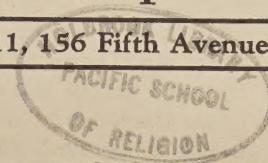
"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, Room 1111, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Number 94

July, 1944



THE RURAL CHURCH OF TOMORROW

By Aaron H. Rapking*

The rural church has a glorious past. A large percentage of the leaders of the church had their hearts strangely warmed at the altars of rural churches.

The circuit rider followed newly blazed trails through the wilderness, forded swollen streams, and, in the homes, in the schoolhouses, in new church buildings, or under the sheltering trees or open sky, pointed the way to "the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world!"

The pioneer rural church was the intellectual and social center as well as the spiritual dynamo of the neighborhood. It was through the rural church that youths and adults were challenged to turn from narrow, selfish, sinful ways and live up to higher and nobler ideals.

To us comes a challenge to help usher in a new day for the rural church--a day when the home, the school, the agricultural extension service, and the farm organization will co-operate and share their efforts with the church in building the kingdom of God in the countryside. In this new day scientific methods of farming, greatly increased communication facilities, an ever-expanding educational equipment in home, shop, and barn, the tractor and other improved farm machinery, will be considered allies of the church as well as aids in taking the drudgery out of farm life.

Ministers and Teachers

To help usher in this new day we need ministers and church-school teachers who can help farm people get a clearer picture of the relationship between conserving and improving the soil and the growing of souls, between the sacredness of the soil and the sacredness of personality. They will imitate the great Teacher by taking illustrations from the world in which farm people live, move, and have their being. They will help farmers sense the presence of God as they, His partners, till the soil and grow and harvest the crops. They will help them to realize that every day is a holy day, and that this is indeed a holy earth. They will help the farmer and his family to see God at work in the resurrection that takes place in the spring in the budding trees and opening flowers, in the ripening fruit and in the waving fields of grain in the summer, in the goldenrod and in the gorgeous color combinations of autumn, in the snowflakes that cover the landscape in winter. They will help the farmer to feel that he and God are sharing their life and energy as he milks the cows, feeds the poultry, tills the soil, and harvests the crops.

*The Rev. Aaron H. Rapking, D.D., is Associate Superintendent, Department of Town and Country Work, Division of Home Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Church.

The worship, preaching, and teaching program will not tend to set up an escape from reality but will help the farmer to feel at home in the universe and in performing any task that will make a contribution to help God bring up his great family. Farm people will be helped to feel and sense the dignity of labor, the sacredness of wholesome play, the merging of mind and soul and the energy produced by the body day by day in the making of a living and the making of a life.

If we accept this challenge of the new day, the rural church will take lessons from scientific agriculture by more fully discovering and applying the laws of growth and development of persons. The rural church of the future must much more adequately help the farmer to appreciate the fact that the spiritual life of the farm people reaches into every phase of life, and that a Christian attitude toward the soil is basic in developing a right relationship to God.

If we accept this challenge, the preaching and teaching program of the rural church of tomorrow will blend in achieving these goals even as our hands co-operate as we eat our food. Basic concepts concerning God, Christ, the Bible, the family and the land, the meaning and significance of life, the relationship of the church to other character-building agencies in the building of the kingdom of God, will, in the preaching and teaching program of the rural church, supplement one another even as do the threads that are woven together in the making of our garments. These programs will be God- and life-centered. Ministers and church-school teachers will be aware of what is being taught in the grades, in the high schools, and in the colleges in order that all the preaching and teaching and living processes in the home, in the church, and in the community may supplement one another. The concept of education will not be limited to the classroom in the church or school but will include the whole of life.

Homes and Community

If we accept this challenge of the new day, the rural church tomorrow will help to stem the rising tide of materialism and paganism, which result in broken homes and in race suicide. By exalting parenthood, by emphasizing the fact that in bringing children into the world and in helping them grow into noble men and women, loyal members of the church, parents will feel that they are God's redemptive co-laborers. The home will be considered a holy of holies, a laboratory in which the teachings of Christ are first of all applied, thereby achieving the fruits of the spirit in the blessed relationship of the family.

If we accept this challenge of the new day, the rural church of tomorrow will appreciate the fact that while its peculiar and divine mission is to help build the kingdom of God in the world, other institutions and agencies are also engaged in this holy task, consciously and unconsciously, to the extent that they help childhood, youth, and ripening adulthood develop in accordance with God's plans and purpose. The teaching and preaching program will help to make it clear to members of the church that they are representatives of Christ in the 4-H club, in the homemakers' club, in the Grange, in the Farm Bureau, in the classroom, on the playground, in the home, and in every other relationship of life. Church members have the opportunity and the responsibility of letting their light shine, thus bringing the redemptive love of Christ into the whole picture of existence. In this way the rural church fellowship will more and more permeate the 4-H-club movement, the educational process as promoted through our schools and colleges and other character-building agencies, our marketing facilities, and our political life with the spirit of Christ.

The Need for Fellowship

If we accept this challenge of the new day, the rural church of tomorrow will be more fellowship- and less organization- and building-minded. We do need greatly to improve most of our rural church buildings to make them more worshipful and provide for better teaching facilities. Too many of our rural church buildings are the weathervanes of a lack of spiritual vitality and vision. In many situations our churches need to be reorganized so as to gear in with the changing rural picture. Evidently some churches should join with others when economic resources are inadequate and the constituency is too small. No doubt in some situations we should look forward to the consolidation of churches, providing adequate church buildings located near consolidated schools. But all these changes can and will be brought about when our church becomes more fellowship-minded.

Too many of our ministers receive inadequate salaries, and it is generally conceded that this is one of the greatest problems confronting our town and country churches. There are those who think that if we could pay our seminary graduates eighteen hundred dollars a year and

furnish them with well-built and well-equipped parsonages, rural-church problems would be speedily solved. Then, there are those who seem to believe that if we could forget our denominational heritage and have just one denomination, all problems would fade out of the rural-church picture. But we could do all these things and still not have a real church.

The real church is the fellowship of those who have acknowledged and experienced and continue to experience the saving and redeeming grace of Jesus Christ and are earnestly going about the task of exalting him by the way they live.

Christ and Tomorrow

On my desk in our home we have an illuminated globe of the world. As I look at it, listen to the reports that come over the radio, read the newspapers, and try to comprehend what is going on in war-stricken Europe and Asia, a heavy burden rests on my heart and soul. In my office, over my desk, I have a map of the United States. As I look at that map and think of the many small, struggling churches; the large number of improperly or untrained and underpaid ministers; the lack of co-operation on the part of the home, the school, the community, and the government; the many poorly trained and half-hearted church-school teachers; the waning influence of the Bible in country life; and the lack of vision, consecration, and evangelistic and missionary zeal, I am quite disturbed and feel that all of us, in ourselves, are inadequate for the challenge that comes to us as we think, pray, and plan for the rural church of tomorrow.

But on the wall above my desk is a large picture of the face of Christ. As I look into His kindly, piercing eyes, His set jaw, His radiant face, I feel strength coming into my soul. When I meditate on the message He brought from God and the way He demonstrated His sincerity by the way He lived and died on the Cross, and when I think of what He meant to my mother and means to me and my family, to the church, to our nation, and to the world, my heart grows strangely warm. And I challenge you to join me in placing our hands in His pierced hands and say, "Lead on, O King Eternal!"

* * * * *

IF I WERE A RURAL PASTOR

Hardly a week has gone by during the last half century that I have not been in contact in some way or another with a rural church--first, as a boy in southeastern Ohio, then, as a student pastor in Illinois and, later, as a pastor in northern and southern Ohio. For three years I supervised the work of student pastors at West Virginia Wesleyan, and for seventeen years I worked with churches of all denominations in the state. Since 1938, it has been my privilege to have group and personal conferences with ministers in all but four states of the United States. Out of these years of observation and experience have come some conclusions as to what I would do if I were again serving as a rural pastor today.

First, I would honestly, earnestly, and sincerely, in the spirit of humility, try to discover God's will for my whole life. To my way of thinking, there is no substitute for an intimate, close, sane, practical, realistic, and heart-warming relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. To aid me in developing the consciousness of the presence of God in my life, I would daily read and study the Bible. I would have a stated time for prayer, but would not limit my prayer life to any particular time but would heed Paul's admonition and would "pray without ceasing." I would pray particularly for guidance in preparing my messages and in helping my church or churches plan their programs and activities. I would have a list of folks who are in need of the saving grace of Christ, and would remember the sick, the discouraged, those bearing unusual burdens and, particularly, the young people, in my prayers.

Second, I would, with the help of the church leaders, make a complete list of all the people for whom my church or churches had the primary responsibility. We would make a survey that would enable us to get as clear a picture as possible of the home, social, educational, recreational, economic, and spiritual life of the people. I would want to know all my people by their given names. I would want to know who owns their homes or farms and would make a list of those for sale. I would want to know the sources of income of my people. I would make a map of my parish on which I would show the location of all homes, roads, schools, and business places, as well as note any other important places and facts about the community. I would keep this map over my desk in my study, and a copy in an appropriate place on wallboard in the church. From time to time, with this map before me, I would remember all my church members by name in my prayers. To make this feasible, I would group my families into groups or by neighborhoods. Then, too, I would make up a prayer list of those who have not acknowledged Christ

as their Savior, and who are not enjoying the fellowship of the church. I would endeavor to help my people develop kindly, appreciative, helpful attitudes toward all people within the parish.

Third, I would make a thorough study of my church-school to discover the needs of the various age groups and the type of literature and teaching methods best adapted to meet these needs. I would devote much time to working and studying with the teachers and officers of the church-school and the official leaders of the church to help them get as clear a picture as possible of their opportunities and responsibilities as God's co-workers. I would endeavor to help them feel and appreciate the fact that we are engaged in the glorious task of working with God in the development of Christlike personalities. I would help them taste the joy that comes from having a concern for the spiritual, material, and intellectual welfare of others—in fact, I would go the second mile in speaking an appreciative word and in giving recognition to all who were giving of their time, strength, and resources to help folks and groups discover and do God's will and develop the fellowship of the church.

Fourth, I would endeavor to help my people appreciate the fact that they either represent or misrepresent Christ in all their relationships at home, among their neighbors in the Grange, the Farm Bureau, the 4-H Club, the community or in any group activities in which they participate. I would endeavor to help my people understand how the various phases of life are related to each other and how Christ fits into the picture of bringing about the redemption of the whole of life. I would make clear to my people the possibilities of how through other agencies and organizations they can exalt Christ and help build the Kingdom of God in the community and in the world.

Fifth, in my preaching (which I would consider one of my basic tasks) I would emphasize the fact that the will of God is basic for all normal living. I would exalt Christ and help my people see that Christ is not an outsider in the universe but that He came from God, the heart of the universe, to help us discover and do the will of God in our personal and group relationships and to make more concrete, real, and effective, the ceaseless, eternal process of redemption. I would make much of the church as a fellowship of all followers of Christ around the world. I would make it clear to my people that the home is by all odds the greatest character building unit. I would help my people feel at home in the universe by helping them achieve a Christian philosophy of life, and much would be said about the unity of life and how tilling the soil, harvesting the crops, caring for the livestock, doing the housework, preparing the meals, and all necessary everyday tasks are a part of the process of developing Christlike personalities. I would use many illustrations in my sermons to show that on the farm and in the countryside there are many evidences of laws that determine the growth and development of animal and plant life and that, likewise, there are laws which must be obeyed if the best results are to be achieved in attaining Christlike personalities. I would keep a large globe of the world with an electric light in it near the pulpit as an aid in helping my people comprehend more fully the implication of what it means to be a disciple of Christ, the Savior of the world. I would endeavor to inspire my people to become missionary-minded in terms of the neighborhood, the community, the natural area, the county, state, nation, and whole world. I would magnify the activities being promoted through churches, schools, and other agencies that have as their objective the prayer "Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven."

In my ministry I would proceed on the basis that in achieving Christlike personalities in all our relationships, living is much more important than talking, teaching, or preaching. I would join with other ministers in the natural area as a member of a Group Ministry Unit to pray, study, and plan for the redemption of the total life of the area. It would be my purpose to cooperate with the school, the Agricultural Extension Service and with all agencies that have as their purpose helping people achieve more of the abundant life and the building of the Kingdom of God in the world.

Last but not least, I would love my people. Their burdens would be my burdens, their sorrows my sorrows, their hopes my hopes, and their joys would be my joys. I would endeavor, with the help of God, to so live among my people that whenever they would think of me they would think of Christ who went about doing good and who, along the way and on special occasions, talked to folks about how they could and ought to live as obedient sons and daughters of God.